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A LOOK AHEAD FOR THE SMALL LIBRARY

By C. C. WILLIAMSON, *Chief, Division of Economics, New York Public Library*

Let me confess at once that I venture to discuss the problem of the small library only as an onlooker. Though for twenty years I have had a more or less intimate association with some small libraries, my professional work has been done in one of the two largest libraries in the country. My object is therefore to try to convey to you who are intimately acquainted with the problems of the small library some of the impressions an outsider has acquired in one way or another of its present status and some of his guesses as to what are likely to be the immediate lines of progress.

By small library I mean roughly speaking all public library work outside of the large cities. Nor is it entirely a matter of the size of a city, for some fairly large cities have small libraries, and vice versa. Perhaps you have read the "Portrait of a Village" in a recent issue of the *Atlantic* in which the author says, "I am going to venture, while I have the courage of my discouragement, a guess that the future of civilization and well-being of this continent is in the cities. . . . It is a bitter thought for the country-minded person to be forced to." My impression of the present status of the small library in this country borders on bitter disappointment to one who would like to think that the future of library service is in the small institution that comes close to the people in their everyday lives. If it were not for the exceptions, for the bright spots here and there, and the signs of something better in the future, I fear that in the "courage of my discouragement" I would locate the future of library service entirely in the larger cities.

Letters come to us from every part of the country, as I suppose they do to all large libraries, begging for assistance in getting access to books which ought to be available in every community. Anyone who tries to do anything more serious

than recreational reading outside of the large city, knows how very little help he will get from local libraries. The simple fact is that only a small per cent of the population of this country has an opportunity to use even the most important things in print. If we believe in democracy and equality of opportunity, we must look forward to giving everyone an opportunity to a share, through reading, in the culture, experience and knowledge of mankind. If opportunity for religious worship were as unevenly distributed as access to books, city churches would have an unexampled opportunity for missionary work.

If we are to look ahead in any practical way, we must scrutinize more closely the present status of the small library, and in doing so perhaps we shall find that the fundamental cause of its present low estate is the fact of its smallness. Most libraries are too small to be administratively and economically efficient. I know that many small libraries indignantly repudiate this suggestion, and without doubt some few of them succeed remarkably well under the circumstances. It seems to me that the average small library in most states is an anachronism and a survival, in a class with the ungraded and unsupervised district school; and no one who has not known such schools intimately realizes how serious an indictment this is.

The small, independent and self-sufficing library represents a stage of social development now definitely belonging to the past. Historically the small collection of books, intrinsically good, perhaps, but ill-adapted to the tastes and needs of the community, and unconnected with the resources in books and personnel of the larger community, belongs with the village shoemaker or wagonmaker and many other features of a time when social and economic organization was far simpler than it can be today. The small community in

most parts of the country no longer aims to be economically self-sufficient. My great-grandfather worked in the winter making boots and shoes for his neighbors. The product was expensive and inferior in nearly every way to the machine-made product of today. Some may lament the passing of the simpler stage of economic life, but it is gone beyond recall, unless some ignorant attack on the so-called capitalistic production succeeds in turning back momentarily the wheels of time and reducing life again to its primitive forms.

The attempt of the small community to be self-sufficient in library service is just as much a relic of the past as the village shoemaker actually making shoes in competition with modern machinery and factory methods. Economic forces automatically and painlessly eliminated the shoemaker, but educational and cultural institutions do not so automatically conform to new conditions. Inertia, failure to understand what has happened, a mistaken sense of local pride, combine to block the wheels of progress.

Changes in social, political, industrial and economic life usually necessitate corresponding modifications in educational and cultural institutions. Great changes have been wrought in the educational system, but in most places the public library stands where it was a generation ago. Small public libraries as a rule continue in the grooves marked out at the time the library movement started. In the meantime a vast evolution has occurred. Reading for practical purposes connected with affairs of daily life has grown from nothing to very great importance. Cheap and abundant reading matter, particularly for recreational needs, in newspapers and magazines, has made most communities independent of the public library for "something to read." While practical coöperation with the public schools and other public interests and work with children and other special classes, have developed in the larger libraries, except in a few cases, small libraries have stood still.

On the other hand, since the movement

began for establishing in every community a separate free library, revolutionary changes have occurred in means of transportation and communication. Cheap and rapid transportation, parcel post, rural mail delivery, automobiles and good roads, telephones, etc., have wrought great changes in the problems of small communities. A vital library movement starting now would take account of these factors. Here and there a library service has been developed in keeping with present-day conditions, but for the most part outside the large cities it is a generation behind the times, and new libraries are being established as if nothing had happened.

The present status of the small library, as I see it then, with exceptions here and there, perhaps in a few cases almost making exception of whole states, is that of an institution a generation behind the times, untouched by changes which have taken place in our economic and social life. The indifference of the community proves in itself that the library is a dead or decadent institution. It will have to be made over into an active force in the community or disappear.

One of the most important causes of its present condition is a disregard of the vital demand of modern life that every occupation must be based on fitness and skill which is nearly always the product of special training. The chief reason the small library is so near the discard is that it lacks a trained personnel. Perhaps we may say that it lacks a trained personnel because it is so badly adjusted to our social and economic life. I do not raise at this moment the question of whether it is going to be possible to get trained librarians without radically making over the system.

We have spoken of some changes that have already taken place. Changes of great importance in their effect on library service will continue to take place. Many of them cannot now be anticipated; perhaps some can be. Conditions under which the small library, in common with all libraries, must operate twenty-five years from

now, will doubtless be very different. While we are striving to break the bonds of the past, should we not also seek to sense what the future has in store and endeavor to avoid another crystallization? We think too little of the necessity of flexibility in organization, aims and methods to meet changing conditions.

Trying to forecast what the future holds that must be taken into account in planning for library progress, it seems to me we can safely assume that:

(1) Transportation and communication will constantly improve, which means, among other things, that less and less reason will exist for even fairly large libraries trying to hold in their own local collections all the books that are to be used in the community at any time.

(2) All branches of the public service must increase in efficiency, because the public will demand a full return for the expenditure of public money.

(3) Everybody will be trained for his work. A school of instruction for street sweepers has already proved its utility. Libraries will not be granted an exception.

(4) Specialization of function will receive still more emphasis, giving the benefits of division of labor and requiring a more scientific organization.

(5) All processes that can be reduced to routine will take advantage of the economies of large scale operations.

(6) Illiteracy will practically disappear, while working hours grow shorter, and a larger proportion of the population will demand an opportunity to make practical use of their ability to read.

(7) New methods of instruction and new avenues of recreation and culture will arise, some requiring the coöperation of the library, others competing with it. The library must be flexible in spirit and organization.

(8) We shall know more about the formation and control of public opinion in a democracy. There is an important rôle for the public library if it can adapt itself to the needs of the hour.

It is a rich opportunity that awaits a properly organized library service outside the large cities. Only thirty-one per cent of the population live in places of more than 25,000. In the cities educational opportunities are richer and more varied, so that the library field is somewhat narrower than in the smaller community where

the library is the most practical substitute for many agencies which in the city work independently of it. Not only does it have less competition from other claims on the attention of the people, but it is in a position to mold public opinion as the city library is not.

In every small community there should be an opportunity for the trained librarian at least equal to that of the doctor, the minister, and the head of the schools. Like them, she should, given proper conditions, command the respect and confidence of the community and be a leader in all community enterprises. The librarian in the small community, provided she have energy, tact, intelligence and human sympathy, may become the friend and counselor of all the people.

I have touched upon the present status of the small library, and the opportunity awaiting it, as they present themselves to my limited view. If my estimate is correct, there is a great gap between performance and opportunity which should be a challenge to everyone who believes in the social utility of a library service. Three needs stand out conspicuously—the need of a trained personnel, the need of coöperation and some degree of centralization, and a fundamental need for standards of service.

I have a hope that the training problem can be solved by some such plan as I shall outline at a later session of the Conference. I get the impression that very little training is available for meeting specifically the larger problems of library service in a small community. A few commissions are evidently doing good work, but I fancy you will agree with me that an adequately trained personnel for the small library as at present organized is either an economic impossibility or most wasteful. Coöperation between libraries and some degree of centralization is a prerequisite for efficient service at a cost within the reach of small communities. The opportunity for genuine coöperation is probably little realized—coöperation in book selection, purchase, cataloging, classification, binding,

etc. But none of these is possible with wholly untrained and often incompetent librarians.

In the matter of book selection, even the trained librarian needs more skilled assistance than is now available as a rule. It is quite out of the question for one person in a small part of her time to keep abreast of what is published on many subjects in such a way as to make a little money produce large results. A good illustration of the kind of help I should think ought to be extended continuously to the librarian of a small library, not in one subject only but in a large number, is found in an article in the current issue of *Public Libraries* on "Art work that can be done in small libraries." Speaking of the fact that small libraries do little in art because of the erroneous notion that large expenditure for books is necessary, the author says: "When it is not so much a collection of books as the librarian's interest in the subject that is needed, the matter becomes very simple"; all of which is very true, but no librarian can make every subject a hobby. We need some way of passing on to the rest of us the knowledge and experience of the hobby rider.

Now I dare say I have dwelt at too great length on some well-known problems and difficulties that face the small library. Perhaps I have succeeded in giving the impression that I am wholly unaware that anybody has ever before thought of these things or been striving to find a way out. Of course I know full well that each of the commissions in the League is endeavoring, with every means at its command, to help the small libraries by bringing them together in some kind of coöperative system, to offset some of the disadvantages of the small unrelated library, to promote professional spirit and training and to set standards of efficiency. Of course, also, I know something about the county system which is so well adapted to solve many of the problems of the small library.

When I speak of the need of coöperation and centralization as the great desideratum, I am thinking of the commissions

and county work. It seems to me we should look forward to giving the state library commissions much larger authority than any of them now possess and much greater financial support. I fancy we face an uphill task in bringing local boards and librarians to realize that their opportunity for usefulness depends to a great extent on giving up some of their precious independence. If they could see the situation as an outsider sees it, the small libraries in every state would become ardent champions of county systems and strong commissions, instead of looking with suspicion and jealousy on what seems to them an unwarranted encroachment on local autonomy.

The outlook for small libraries seems so entirely dependent on the work of commissions, county systems, and improved state laws, that mere enlightened self-interest ought to lead them to organize a movement for library extension that would convince members of the legislatures of its vital importance. I fear that too often, however, legislators get the wrong kind of impression from attempts to strengthen commission work. On the one hand, the commission, not being sufficiently distinguished from the more politically minded state bodies, is suspected of desiring merely to extend its power for selfish reasons. On the other hand, the indifference or hostility of local library interests makes it perfectly safe for legislatures to withhold their aid. With taxpayer, politician and local influences against them, progressive library measures have little chance. We cherish the thought that library commissions are not in politics and doubtless in most cases they are not, of their own volition, but it has seemed to me they are the victims of a situation which is primarily political.

If the actual situation is at all as I imagine it to be, it is the most urgent duty of the League of Library Commissions and of the A. L. A. to organize a country-wide library propaganda. As to the form and methods of such propaganda, I am not rash enough to dogmatize, but since in this

"look ahead" a liberal dose of speculation may be in order, I would suggest that none of our professional organizations, state or national, is fitted to take the leadership. I have a notion that in every state is needed a strong organization of prominent laymen who thoroughly understand the library problem in its larger aspects and who will work hand in hand with the profession in putting the library system of the state on an efficient basis. It will require skill and tact on the part of the professional librarians to engineer such an organization into activity, but I see no insuperable difficulty.

Since I know of no such organization, perhaps I can illustrate what I have in mind by citing the Civil Service Reform League in New York State. There is a body of substantial citizens, lawyers and business men, men and women prominent in various walks of life, who make it a serious business to protect and promote the merit system in public office. It watches legislation and administrative officials with an eagle eye. Its statements carry far more weight than would the protests or recommendations of the civil service employees, because, for one thing, no one suspects the Reform League of acting from ulterior motives. I must not take the time to enlarge upon this suggestion. Underlying it is the fundamental idea that extensions and improvements in any branch of the public service do not originate in legislative or official bodies nor, as a rule, in the ranks of the employees who conduct the service which needs to be reorganized and extended, but in some organized movement of public-spirited citizens. I believe it will be found that this principle holds in respect to nearly all kinds of educational and developmental work. I believe we have no such organizations anywhere ready to use every legitimate means to secure a modern and efficient library service throughout the state.

In what I have just been saying I have had in mind particularly those states that have made some beginning at least towards solving the problem of the small

and rural library. Much more discouraging, of course, is the situation in a large number of states where extension work is entirely lacking. Here, too, it seems to me the first step must be to organize also into some sort of a public library association all the influential citizens who can be interested in library extension. The main difference between such an organization in the backward and the more progressive state is that in the backward states the primary and immediate object would not be to secure legislation, but to educate the people of the state to the meaning of a library service. Through the moral and material support which can be mustered within and without the state, such an association could unofficially function in many respects as a library commission, coordinating such local activities as exist, operating traveling libraries, and conducting an educational campaign designed to bring the local communities to the point of being willing to vote taxes and support state legislation. In other words, I visualize the backward state as a kind of mandatory in charge of the voluntary organization until such time as it is ready to take its place as a member of the League.

And this leads me finally to one more speculation as to what the future may hold for the small library interests which I think of as identical with the work of the commissions. Has the League ever considered the feasibility of setting up minimum standards for commission work and according some special recognition to the states that maintain such standards? We think at once of the accredited library schools as a similar device. My thought is that certain most salutary results might follow formal recognition of the excellent work being done by some of the commissions. Might it not save them from being forced to take backward steps at times? Might it not reinforce the efforts being put forth in those states which have inadequate laws? It seems to me that perhaps in the first flush of enthusiasm for publicity we are in danger of relying upon it overmuch. Publicity of a high order will

be required, but do we not in addition need to set up definite standards of achievement? Publicity for liberty and victory loans, book funds, etc., would have failed without definite quotas for states and communities, i. e., without definite standards of achievements which stimulate endeavor and arouse local pride. Definite standards of attainment represent a fundamental psychological principle which has too small a place in library organization and administration.

I do not know, of course, whether the League would feel able to standardize its own membership or whether it would prefer to have the standards fixed by, and their application entrusted in part to, some detached body, such as the A. L. A. Let us hope, however, that we do not have to look too far ahead for the time when we can say that this state or that is meeting the recognized professional standards.

Sooner or later, and of course as soon as possible, the up-to-standard commission should be in a position to apply minimum standards to all local library activities. I cannot omit to express the belief that we must look forward to such standardization and make it one of our principal objects of endeavor, but that is a very large subject which I have neither the detailed information or time at present to discuss. The little that I do know about the problem of standardization strengthens my belief that when we come to attack it, it will not be found so difficult as we may now imagine. In this optimistic view I am encouraged by what Mr. Sanborn writes in the June *Library Journal*: "Judging from an acquaintance with many librarians and as many library trustees, I feel safe in saying that practically every one of them has an honest pride in his own library and a desire to see it better than any other in its class."

HOW THE PUBLIC LIBRARY COMMISSION OF INDIANA WORKS WITH THE SMALL PUBLIC LIBRARIES OF THE STATE

By MARGARET A. WADE, *Assistant Organizer, Indiana Public Library Commission*

The Public Library Commission of Indiana, now about twenty years old, is among the older organizations established in the various states for the purpose of aiding and increasing the efficiency of public libraries.

Very naturally a large part of the work of the commission lies in its service to the smaller libraries. To fully appreciate the value of such service one must at some time be a trustee or the librarian of a small library and learn by actual experience how many and how varied are the problems in administration and economy which develop at a rapid rate from the moment the possibility of having a free library in the town is considered.

Few large towns or cities are now without well established libraries with trained librarians to administer them. Their real difficulties are comparatively few and are

more easily adjusted. It is the library in the small town or rural community which finds the public library commission "a very present help."

Many of our smaller libraries have had their origin in the women's clubs or among the school people who have felt the need of books but who did not fully understand the best method of attaining the desired result. How to go about getting a collection of books, where to house them, what to do with them, and how to keep up the supply; these are questions which someone must answer.

Public interest must be aroused and stimulated, and counsel given. A plan of organization that will be acceptable and at the same time insure legal rights must be formulated. The public library commission is called upon for advice. Meetings are held at which a representative from